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ABSTRACT

Head Start has been successful because it includes comprehensive services, parent involvement and family support, a commitment to meeting local needs, training and technical assistance support, and a collaborative approach. This ERIC Digest briefly describes each of these components. Discussion concludes by noting that Head Start must take more responsibility for sharing information about its successes and failures and its staff's desire to be an important part of the human services team in the community. Sources of additional information are cited. (RH)

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ERIC Digest

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The Head Start Experience

Nancy J. Mallory and Nancy A. Goldsmith

In 1990, Head Start celebrated its 25th Anniversary. Head Start has been successful because it includes comprehensive services, parent involvement and family support, a commitment to meeting local needs, training and technical assistance support, and a collaborative approach.

Many people see Head Start only as an educational experience for children. Although Head Start is proud of its education component, its services are much more comprehensive. As described in the Head Start Program Performance Standards—the regulations which govern the program—"the overall goal of Head Start is to bring about a greater degree of social competence in children of low-income families. By social competence is meant the child's everyday effectiveness in dealing with both the present environment and later responsibilities in school and life" (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1984).

Comprehensive Services

The Head Start programs include health, education, parent involvement, and social services. Such comprehensive services are designed to meet the needs of children in the context of the family. Head Start's success in providing these services is reflected in hundreds of real life stories, and in annual statistics reported by more than 1,200 programs across the country. In 1988-89:

- 99% of children enrolled 90 days or more completed medical screening and 98% of those identified as needing treatment received it.
- 98% of the children completed all the required immunizations or were up-to-date in their immunizations.
- 95% of the families received social services directly from Head Start or through referral to other agencies.

With these services, Head Start maximizes the strengths of each child and influences development. As part of this effort, the education component provides children with a learning environment made up of varied experiences that help children develop socially, intellectually, physically, and emotionally.

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Parent Involvement and Family Support

From the day Head Start staff recruit children, they expect parents to be involved. Encouraging and facilitating parent involvement is a mandated responsibility of each Head Start staff member. Every Head Start program has a Parent Involvement Coordinator. This important staff member does much to assure that the mandates regarding parent involvement are assigned to specific staff members and that there is two-way communication between staff and parents. Thus, the process of involving parents becomes more than just talk—it happens! And the Parent Involvement Coordinator helps track progress.

Each Head Start program encourages parents to:

- volunteer in a classroom,
- participate in home visits by the teacher at least twice a year,
- attend parent education classes,
- enroll in job training programs, literacy programs, or other adult education,
- serve on policymaking bodies,
- apply to work in the program, and
- serve in state, regional, or national Head Start associations.

Head Start has a remarkable track record with parent involvement. In 1989, over 443,000 parents volunteered in their local Head Start programs, and 36% of the staff were parents of current or former Head Start children (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1990).

Traditional assumptions about parent involvement see parents as outside of the main program. In contrast, Head Start accepts parents as key players, and in fact, *expects* them to be key players. Parents are welcomed, not only as participants, but also as decision makers. Unlike programs that respond to parents as a group, Head Start provides individualized attention to meet the needs of families. Head Start operates on the premise that family needs must be assessed and appropriate services provided if low-income children are to be served properly. With this family support, the program empowers parents as the primary educators of their children (Washington and Oyemade).

A Commitment to Meeting Local Needs

Head Start identifies with the communities it serves. Within guidelines, programs tailor services to meet local needs.

Parents help decide what type of services to provide, where centers will be located, and who will be hired and fired. Frequently, Head Start teachers, teacher aides, parent involvement staff, and social service workers are members of the community. Staff from the community are of inestimable value, because they represent the program to eligible families and the families to other program staff. Locally designed options and innovations allow programs to respond to special community needs, such as substance abuse, and to deliver services in centers and homes.

Training and Technical Assistance Support

Through the years, Head Start has been supported by federally funded training and technical assistance for staff and parents. Initially there were University-based Regional Training Offices, then State Training Offices, Regional Resource Centers, specially funded Child Development Associate training projects, and Resource Access Projects (offering training and technical assistance for those providing service to handicapped children). Local Head Start programs were mandated to provide training, and therefore received their own training and technical assistance funds. Training and technical assistance have been crucial in maintaining program quality and empowering parents.

A Collaborative Approach

Head Start staff believe that collaboration with other service providers and community programs is essential. The many interagency collaborative agreements at the national level include those with the American Red Cross, the Department of Labor, and the Girl Scouts. In cities, counties, and other local areas, Head Start collaborates with such departments as social services, health, and parks and recreation. Head Start also enjoys support from church groups, service clubs, literacy organizations, local libraries, and a host of charitable organizations.

Head Start's formal collaboration with public schools has met with varying degrees of success. Even when school districts are Head Start grantees, other preschool programs may be operating as separate entities in the same school district. In such cases, there seems to be a lack of clarity about each program's goals and mandates.

At the state level, some collaboration results from efforts of State Head Start Associations and Head Start Training and Technical Assistance providers. Historically, Head Start has not had a state presence. State plans for young children have too often ignored state Head Start services. Head Start Collaboration Demonstration Projects are planned in 10 states (*Federal Register*, 1990).

Summary and Conclusions

What lessons have been learned from the Head Start experience of the past 25 years? Head Start works because of the type of services it provides to children and families and because it has received strong support from parents and policymakers (Zigler and Valentine, 1979). Physically and mentally healthy families are essential to children's optimal growth and development. Both families and children must be the focus of service agencies whether these agencies are involved in education, health, social services, or Head Start (Schorr, 1988).

Head Start must take more responsibility for sharing information about its successes and failures and its staff's desire to be an important part of the human services team in the community. Head Start must find more and better ways to share what it has learned and to learn from others' experiences—to be a part of comprehensive community, state, regional, and national planning for services to young children and their families.

This digest was adapted from an article titled, "Head Start Works! Two Head Start Veterans Share Their Views," which appeared in Vol. 45, No. 6 (September, 1990) of *Young Children* (pages 36-39).

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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